

THE PILGRIM OF NOAKHALI

*A Souvenir Album of
Gandhiji's Peace Mission to Noakhali*

PHOTOGRAPHS AND STORY
BY
BRAJA KISHORE SINHA.

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TO
SREEMATI SUCHETA KRIPALANI

Patriotic Daughter of Mother India—Who With Dauntless Courage And Absolute Selflessness Rescued Thousands of Men Women And Children From Death Traps Of Noakhali—Who Instilled Fresh Spirit Of Life Into Their Souls Deadened By Communal Passions—Whose Benign Countenance Will Shine For Ever In The Reborn Hearts Of The Afflicted People Of Noakhali—Who Spontaneously Evoked The Divine Epithet Of “MA” From Thousands Over-come With Her Love And Solitude

This Souvenir Album Is Dedicated In Deep Appreciation.

AUTHOR

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Noakhali Disturbances : A Short Description

In accordance with the recommendations of the British Cabinet Mission to India, an Interim Government was formed and a Constituent Assembly was elected as preliminary steps towards complete independence of the country. Muslim League did not approve this scheme and declared August 16th 1946 as "Direct Action Day" to record their protest against it.

At that time the administration of Bengal was in charge of Muslim League Cabinet. League leaders publicly declared that the programme of "Direct Action Day" would be strictly confined to protest meetings, peaceful demonstrations and processions. But followers of Muslim League in connivance with the League Government in power started a terrible communal riot in the name of "peaceful direct action." During the five days between 16th and 20th August at least five thousand persons lost their lives in the riots and ten thousand more were wounded. Properties worth several crores of rupees were either looted or burnt to ashes.

Even these terrible events paled into insignificance compared to the horrors enacted in Noakhali within a couple of months. In Calcutta, Muslims murdered Hindus and Hindus

killed Muslims in their turn, that is, it was a full fledged communal riot, Noakhali disturbances, however, were of a totally different character. There the predominant majority community made cowardly attacks and inflicted horrible tortures on the handful of Hindus living among them.

On 10th October 1946 disturbances broke out in Noakhali consuming in its inhuman horrors about four hundred villages extending over an area of two hundred square miles. Thousands of Muslims suddenly attacked the handful of Hindu neighbours. Innocent and unsuspecting Hindus, men, women, and children were subjected to the worst horrors ever engineered by man. Murder, loot, arson, rape, abduction and forcible conversion to Islam went on unchecked and unabated for a week.

These disturbances were planned, organised and executed with remarkable efficiency and thoroughness for political ends. Bridges were demolished, roads blocked and telegraph lines severed systematically to cut off the whole area from the rest of the world. The operations were directed with such skill that for five days the area remained completely isolated and no news of the grave situation could reach the outside world.

For some time before the disturbances broke out, a prominent Muslim leader and a former Member of the Legislative Assembly organised big Muslim gatherings and incited them against the Hindus. This Muslim Leaguer was mainly responsible for the Noakhali disturbances. Other Muslim League leaders actively participated in the disturbances by helping and inciting the Muslims in every possible way. Lavish use by Muslim raiders of petrol, a

controlled commodity, definitely proved that even high Government officials were involved in the organised disturbances.

Shri Kamini Kumar Datta and Shri Dhirendra Nath Datta, leader and deputy leader respectively of the Congress blocs in Bengal Legislative Council and Bengal Legislative Assembly, sent jointly a wire to the President, Bengal Provincial Congress Committee, informing him of the grave situation in Noakhali. It was published in the newspapers on 15th October through Bengal Press Advisory Committee.

It stated that, thousands of Muslims had made planned attacks on the villages under the jurisdiction of Ramgunge Police Station. They had indulged in arson, loot and murder of innocent Hindu villagers. They had forcibly compelled the Hindus to slaughter cows and eat beef. Hundreds of women had been abducted and forcibly married to Muslim hooligans. All the Hindu temples had been defiled. The District Magistrate and the Police Superintendent had done nothing for the protection of lives and properties of innocent villagers. The Calcutta riots paled into insignificance before the loot, murder, rape, arson and forcible conversions perpetrated in some of these villages.

Armed hooligans were guarding the entrances to all the roads giving access to the disturbed area of two hundred square miles. No one had been allowed to enter or leave that area. Disturbances had started on 10th October and continued with unabated ^{grievous} fury. The hooligans had been destroying bridges and roads to prevent communication with outside world.

The disturbances had been spreading to Begumgunge and Lakshmigunge police stations and also to Hajigunge, Faridgunge and Laksam in Tipperah district. Immediate military help was necessary for the ^{বাহিনী}rescue of abducted women and safety of the survivors. Whole Chittagong Division would be ruined unless the prevailing lawlessness was stopped even by declaring martial law if necessary.

A Government Press Note dated 15th October stated that, lawlessness had been prevailing in Begumgunge and Lakshmipur police station. Situation at Feni had been brought under control. Strong measures were being taken to restore peace in the disturbed areas. Five persons had been killed when the police opened fire on looters on 13th and 14th October. Armed police reinforcements had been sent to Noakhali and Tipperah.

Parliamentary Secretary to Home Minister Bengal gave a statement on the Noakhali disturbances in the Legislative Assembly in reply to questions by Shri Dharendra Nath Datta, Deputy Leader of Congress Assembly Party.

According to this statement:—

Number of persons killed in Noakhali and Tipperah	..	218
Killed by Military and Police firing	..	6
Number of looted houses	..	4436
Number of houses burnt	..	2599
Number of huts burnt in Tipperah	..	6520

Number of persons forcibly converted in Noakhali could not be ascertained but was estimated to be several thousands. But in Tipperah alone the number of persons forcibly converted was	..	9895
Number of persons arrested in connection with the disturbances	..	2197
Of whom, number of persons released by that time was	..	1821

With regard to abducted women, it was stated that information was received by the Government about seven abducted women, of whom six had been recovered.

First news of the situation in Noakhali reached Calcutta on 15th October, five days after the disturbances had started. Immediately, the then Congress President Acharya J. B. Kripalani, Mrs. Kripalani, Shri Sarat Chandra Bose, Dr. Shyamaprasad Mukherjee and other leaders rushed to Noakhali to gather first hand impression of the situation. Their statements after return from Noakhali revealed the gravity and extent of damage to the public.

After examination of the various factors, Acharya Kripalani expressed the opinion that Noakhali disturbances were direct and inevitable result of Muslim League propaganda. Organised and planned attacks were made by the Muslims of neighbouring villages and not by outsiders. They came in hordes shouting slogans like "Larke Lenge Pakistan" and demanded heavy compensation from Noakhali Hindus for the riot-affected Muslims of Calcutta. Huge amounts were very often demanded as "voluntary subscription" for Muslim League funds. But the Hindus were not spared the horrors of murder, rape, arson and loot

even after payment of large sums of money. The Muslim raiders openly declared that all this was in revenge of Calcutta riots.

After murder, loot and arson, the Hindus were forcibly converted to Islam and compelled to attend mosques regularly every day.

They were forced to wear "loongis" and white "Pakistan caps". Each and every temple was defiled. Many beautiful Hindu women were forcibly married to low class Muslims.

The hooligans invariably used petrol for arson and often used fire-arms. The police remained inactive spectators of this horrible rapine. They said that they were not authorised to open fire except in self-defence.

Even those Hindus who accepted Islam were not left in peace. They were kept interned under close guard and in rare cases allowed to go to adjoining villages under strictly enforced permits. In the face of these terrible happenings only 50 persons had been arrested upto 25th October.

Before the disturbances began to subside Sreemati Sucheta Kripalani went to Noakhali and started relief work. Riot-affected people of Noakhali will for ever cherish the grateful memory of her sincere and incessant labours, amidst the gravest personal danger, for their relief, rescue and rehabilitation.

Describing the results of her investigations among the women victims of the disturbances, Sreemati Sucheta Kripalani said that, the hooligans counted among their colleagues

and supporters educated Muslims including lawyers, teachers, members of village Union Boards and other influential people. In most cases very friendly relations were observed to exist between the police and these influential leaders of goondas. Police was very unwilling to effect arrests of miscreants. Those who dared to lodge complaints with the police were very often subjected to fresh and worse tortures. Muslims strongly objected to the influx of volunteers to the affected area for reliefwork. They even murdered some of the volunteers who had come for rescue and relief of the Hindus. Though their corpses were recovered police did not care to investigate the cases nor to apprehend the culprits.

It was very difficult to estimate the exact number of abducted or raped women. But investigations revealed that their figure must be very high.

Dr. Shyamaprasad Mukherjee stated, we cannot allow thousands of our brothers and sisters to be forced out of the Hindu fold by sheer brute force and threat to life. They were Hindus before this, they are Hindus now and forever they will remain Hindus. No one should even think in terms of purification and penance for a return to Hindu fold.

From what I have seen and heard of Noakhali I am convinced that there is no parallel to it in civilized history. The administrative machinery has completely broken down and the Governor and his Cabinet are entirely responsible for the chaotic condition.

Panic stricken Hindus are leaving their homes, even in areas which have so far remained unaffected. They are coming for shelter and security to comparatively safer regions.

Already about 75 thousand people have taken shelter in relief camps which are considered to be comparatively safer. Thousands of Hindus still remain virtual prisoners in dangerous areas.

Shri Sarat Chandra Bose said that, he had observed from air about 20 villages still in flames on the 19th and 20th October.

On being informed of the details of Noakhali disturbances Sardar Vallabh Bhai Pate remarked, "These forcible conversions have given me more pain than the death of three millions of people in Bengal famine."

Mahatma Gandhi, father of the nation, was immersed in work when news of the terrible happenings at Noakhali trickled out to the outside world. The country was about to achieve independence after prolonged suffering and struggle. At this critical period Pandit Nehru, Sardar Patel and other leaders could not advance a step without Gandhiji's wise counsel and fatherly guidance.

In his postprayer speech on 27th October, Gandhiji declared, "I am starting for Calcutta to-morrow morning. From there I shall go to Noakhali. The journey is long and my health rather indifferent. But I shall have to go at any cost. God will grant me strength to sustain. I am going to console and wipe the tears of grief-stricken men and women of Noakhali. I shall try to instil courage and fortitude in their sinking hearts. I shall not judge any one. My only object is to serve the people—to work for peace and amity between the

two communities. Born in the same country, Hindus and Muslims have lived together for long. They can never be enemies of each other. Can religious differences ever disprove this simple truth?"

Then Mahatmaji came to Calcutta. The whole world watched how the Mahatma would solve the problem. He said, "My life's mission has been to make friends of mutually inimical parties. My ideal of nonviolence will have its supreme test of efficacy in Noakhali. I shall never accept defeat. I would rather die in the effort."

On his way to Noakhali Mahatmaji halted for a few days at Calcutta. During this period Hindus of some districts of Bihar, maddened by the horrible news of Noakhali, wreaked a bloody vengeance upon the Muslim minority of the Province. Loot and murder of Muslims raged over a wide area for several days. Number of casualties in Bihar was far greater than in Noakhali. Cases of abduction were also reported from a number of places.

But there was one thing which made the characters of Bihar and Noakhali disturbances totally different from each other. In contrast to Noakhali, news of the happenings in Bihar reached Patna on the day it started and was flashed throughout India within a couple of days. Due to the sincere and strenuous efforts of the Congress Government the situation was brought under control immediately and the disturbance stopped completely within a week of its start. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and Shri Jay Prakash Narayan went all out in their endeavour to pacify the Hindus, furious with rage and spirit of revenge. They toured throughout

the troubled area. Time and again they faced great personal risk in their attempts to persuade angry and excited mobs, back to the way of sanity and peace. About eight hundred Congressmen were killed or wounded in their efforts to check the riots or to protect Muslim neighbours.

Pandit Nehru directed Bihar ministry to resort to aerial bombing if the riot did not stop immediately. But Shri Sree Krishna Singh, Premier of Bihar, had already issued "shoot to kill" orders against rioters, as a result of which four hundred Hindu goondas were shot dead while looting or rioting. More than five thousand persons were arrested and about eight thousand cases were instituted against miscreants.

Pandit Nehru declared "Fascist policy of Muslim League has given birth to a rival Hindu Fascism. Congress will fight against this double pronged Indian Fascism."

After reaching Noakhali Mahatmaji said, "I find darkness all around. But, surely, it will vanish some day. Successful solution of Noakhali tangle will probably be my last act."

Pandit Nehru went to Srirampur, a village in Noakhali, on 27th December to consult Gandhiji on important political matters. There, in course of a lecture, Panditji said—The disturbances in East Bengal and their aftermath have darkened the bright future of our country. Congress strives for the independence of all, and not for men of a particular religion or community only.

Seventysix years old Gandhiji's arduous tour through hundreds of miles of difficult terrain, walking barefooted through the biting winter is a unique event in world history. He regarded this as a pilgrimage and so he walked barefooted. Mahatmaji described this tour in "Harijan" as "the Surpreme test of the efficacy of the ideal of nonviolence". In course of his solitary tour Gandhiji covered 30 villages in the first stage and 18 villages in the second. Before he could start on the third stage of the tour he had to leave for Bihar. Dr. Syed Mahmud, Relief Minister of Bihar, had requested Gandhiji to visit the province as soon as possible, in a long letter sent through his secretary.

On 2nd March Mahatmaji started for Patna leaving his Noahkali mission unfinished. Addressing the local people before departure Gandhiji said, "You should not think that I am going away for good. I shall return as soon as possible and shall not leave East Bengal till peace and amity are restored between Hindus and Muslims."

But the Mahatma's work remains unfinished. He fell at the hands of an assassin at Delhi. In him were combined nonviolence of Buddha and forgiveness of Christ. Gandhiji, the greatest man of the century and father of Indian nation, is no longer with us.

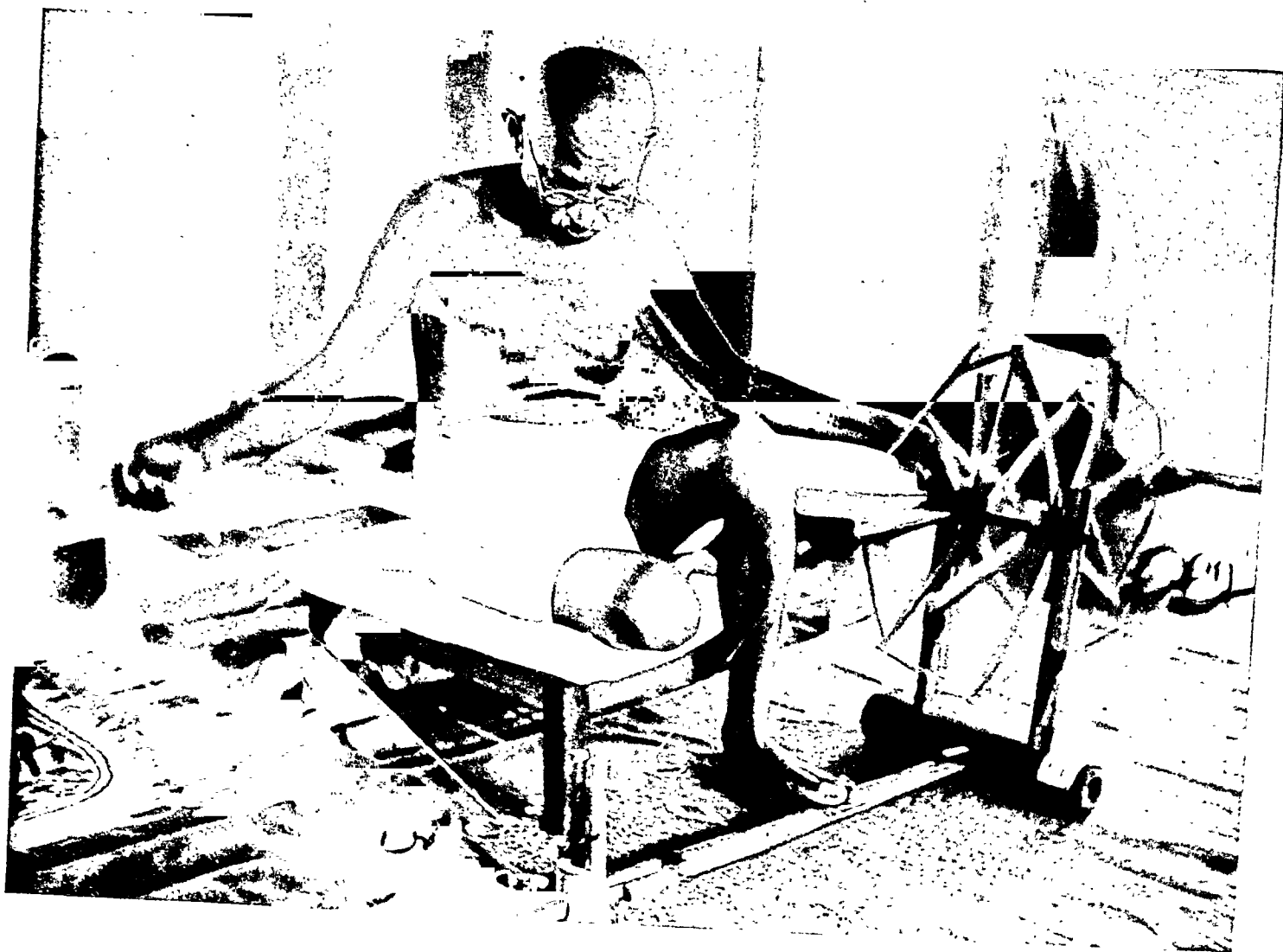


Plate 1

On his way to Noakhali Gandhiji arrived in Calcutta on 29th October 1946 and stayed for a week at Khadi Pratisthan, Sodepur. Even during this short stay Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Patel, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and other leaders visited him for consultations on the problems facing the country.

Mr. H. S. Suhrawardy, the then Premier of Bengal, also called on him several times. He advised Gandhiji that instead of going to Noakhali Gandhiji should visit Bihar and use his influence to check the riots there. In the meanwhile Gandhiji signified his intention to go on fast unless the Bihar riots stopped within 24 hours. He maintained constant telephonic contact with Pandit Nehru who was attempting to quell the Bihar riots.

The Bihar situation was brought under control on the 5th November and Gandhiji started for Noakhali the day after.



At Khadi Pratisthan, Sodepur.

Plate 2

Bengal Government arranged a special train for Gandhiji's journey. On his arrival at Goalundo Gandhiji immediately boarded the steam boat "Kiwi" which was placed entirely at his disposal. A vast crowd had gathered on the river bank anxious to have a sight of Mahatmaji. In response to their desire Gandhiji came out on the deck with folded hands.



Gives darshan from steamer deck.

Plate 3

Addressing the crowd from the steamer Gandhiji said, "Tears and sufferings of mothers and sisters are drawing me to Noakhali. I am going there to wipe away the tears of the tormented and to console the riotstricken."

Gandhiji declared that he would visit every riot-affected village and would not return till peace prevailed in Bengal and his presence proved unnecessary. He did not, however, rule out the possibility of a visit to Bihar.

Gandhiji appealed to Hindus and Muslims for peace and harmony. He said that retaliation would be ruinous to both the religions.



Addressing the crowd from the steamer. On his left Shree Satish Chandra Das Gupta is keeping notes.

Plate 4

Mahatmaji arrived at Chandpur at 8-30 P.M. and stayed on board the "Kiwi" overnight. Mr. Samsuddin Ahmed, Labour Minister, and two Parliamentary Secretaries accompanied him on behalf of Bengal Government.

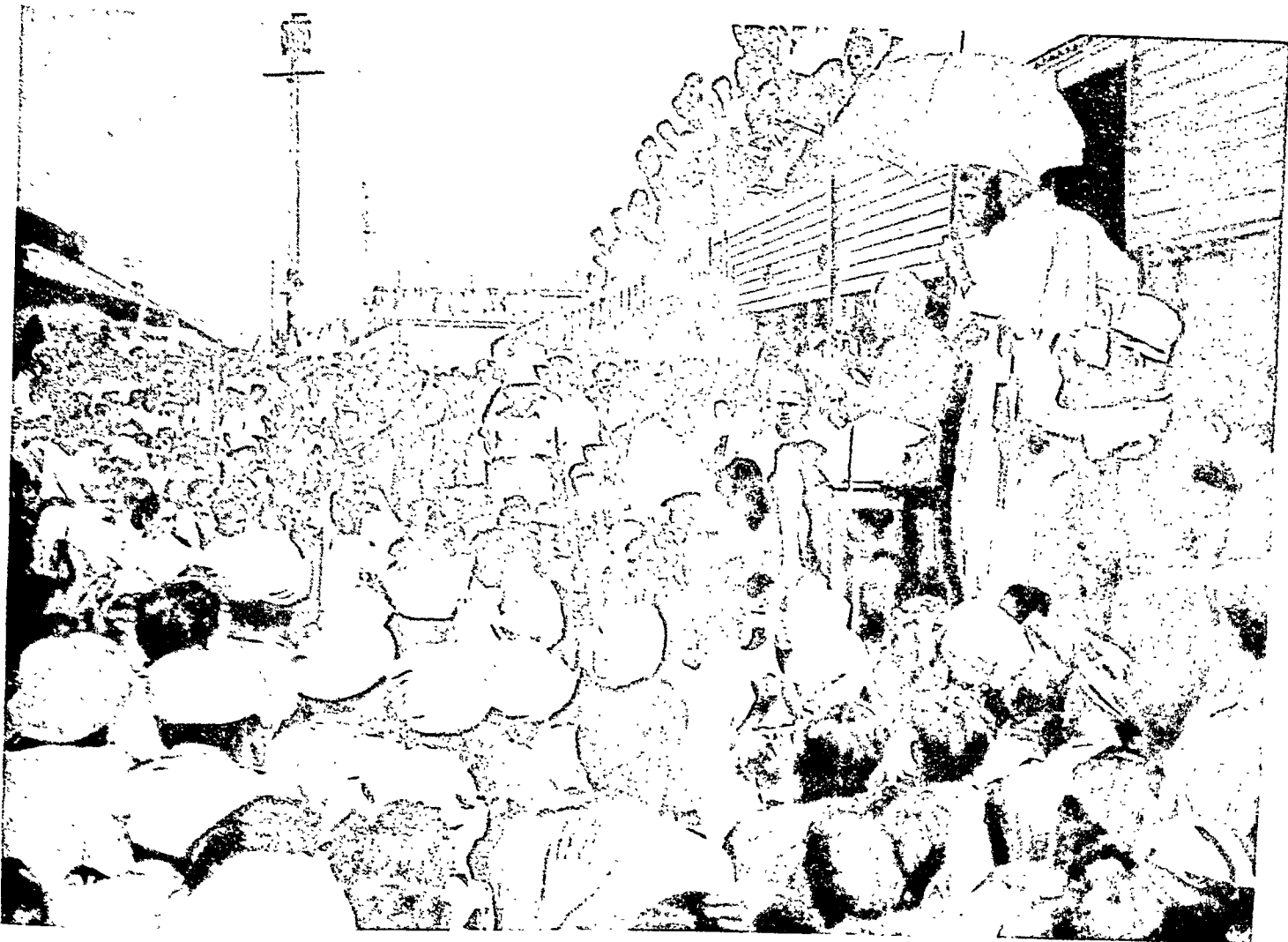
Next morning late Haradyal Nag's son and other local leaders and workers called on him on the steamer. Mahatmaji then again boarded a special train. He addressed the large crowd, which had gathered to see him, from the window of his compartment.



Addressing from the window of his compartment at Chandpur.

Plate 5

On way to Chaumuhani Gandhiji halted at Laksam Railway station. Addressing a large gathering of Hindus and Muslims there, Mahatmaji said that he would not leave Bengal till all fear and apprehension were removed from the minds of the Hindus.



On the platform at Laksham Station.

Plate 5

Raskin

Plate 6

Thousands gathered to have a sight of Gandhiji on all wayside stations between Chandpur and Chaumuhani. Women welcomed him with ceremonial conch shell blowing and other traditional rituals.

Mahatmaji was accompanied by Dr. Sushila Nair, Sm. Ava Gandhi, Sm. Sushila Pye, Shri A. V. Thakkar, Shri Pyarelal, Shri Kanu Gandhi, Shri Satish Das Gupta, Sm. Hemaprova Devi, Shri Makhanlal Sen, Shri Arunagshu De and a group of journalists.



On way to Chawmuhani. Mr. A. V. Thakkar is seen sitting on extreme left.

*Plat 6
Rashan.*

Plate 7

On Mahatmaji's arrival at Chaumuliaji on 7th noon his camp was fixed at the house of Shri Jogen Majnmdar, a local merchant.

As a penance for Bihar riots Mahatmaji had been on half his normal diet for the last eight days. As a result of this he had lost 5 lbs. in weight. A telegram from Pandit Nehru stating that Mahatmaji need not visit Bihar as the riot situation had improved, however, considerably relieved his anxiety.

In the evening Mahatmaji went by boat to the prayer meeting at the local school compound.

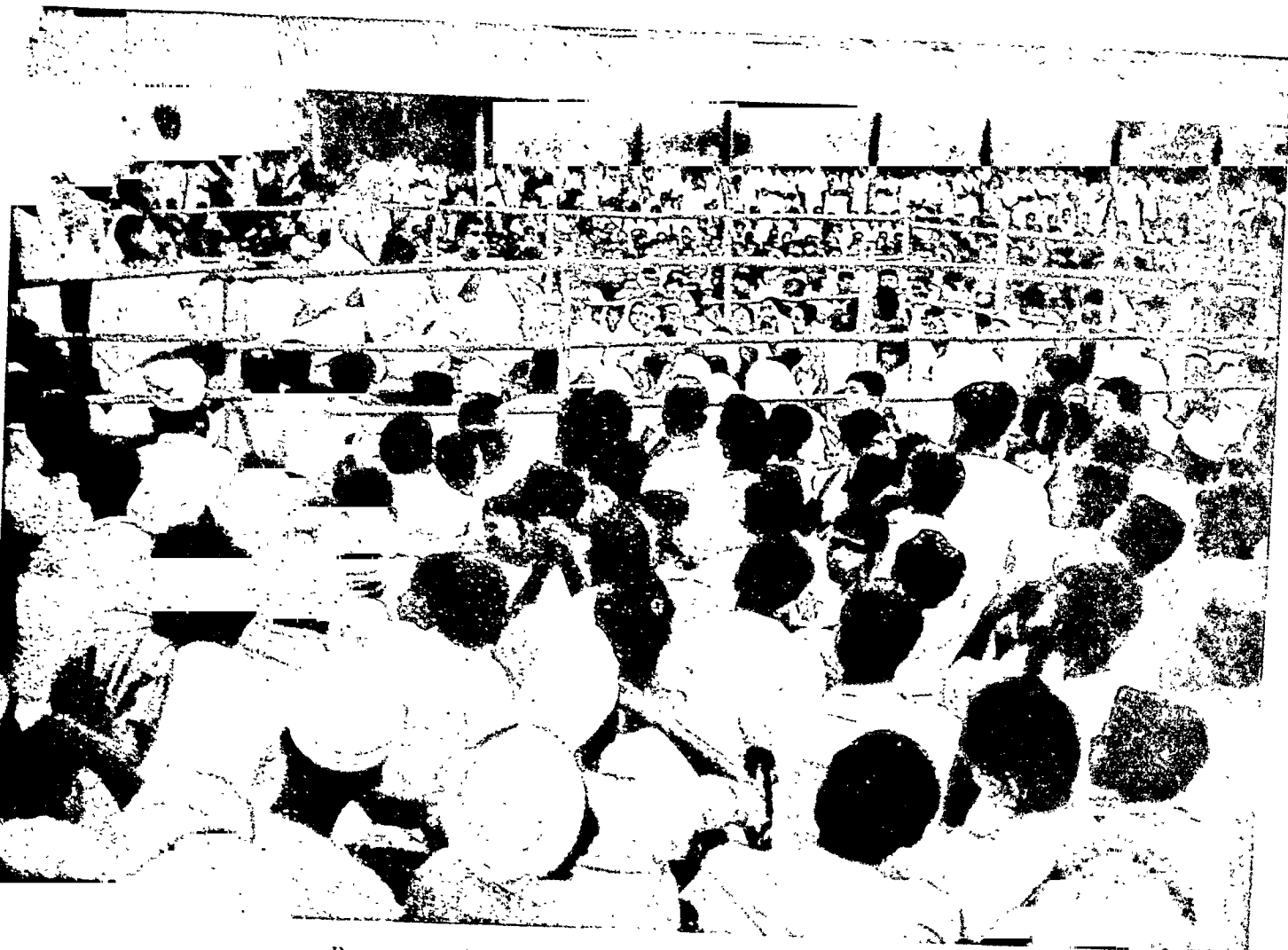


In a country boat, on way to prayer ground at Chawmuhani.

Addressing the prayer meeting at Chaumuhani school, Mr. Samsuddin Ahmed said "Neither Pakistan nor Hindusthan can be established if Hindus and Muslims continue to fight each other. By murdering Hindus, forcibly converting them to Islam and raping their womenfolk, Noakhali Muslims have done a great disservice to Islam. Muslims cannot disown responsibility for the havoc I have witnessed at Char Haim and other villages. League Government cannot tolerate this anarchy. It is your duty to bring the culprits to book."

Mahatma Gandhi then said that Mr. Samsuddin Ahmed had given expression to the feelings he intended to voice himself.

More than 30 thousand people, mostly Muslims, had gathered to hear Mahatmaji's speech at this meeting.



Prayer meeting at Chawmuhani School Compound.

During his stay at Chaumuhani, Mahatmaji visited Gajalpara and Gopalpara. At "Parbari" in Gajalpara twenty persons had been murdered and their corpses thrown into fire. Three girls were abducted from this house.

At Gopalpara Sreemati Sucheta Kripalani showed Gandhiji round numerous blood-stained houses and pointed out to him the place where nineteen persons had been murdered together.

Mahatma Gandhi arrived at Dattapara, fourteen miles from Chaumuhani on 10th November and set up his head-quarters at "Dewanjibari", the biggest house of the locality. Afterwards a relief camp for five thousand persons was set up in this house.

The story of "Dewanjibari" was typical of the murderous campaign against Hindus in Noakhali. A large sum of money was extracted forcibly from its inhabitants as "League Subscriptions". Then came the claim for a lac of rupees more. The riotous mob blockaded the house continuously for three days. In all cases they claimed large sums of money as "league subscription" and then carried out loot, murder, abduction and rape, whether the subscription was realised or not.

Immediately after his arrival at "Dewanjibari", Mahatmaji visited Gopair Bag village and inspected the looted houses and places where people had been murdered.



Mahatmajee and his party walking to Gopair Bag village through paddy fields.

After his return from Gopair Bag, Gandhiji met the local leaders and representatives of riot affected Hindus. He listened to their tragic tale and said, "I cannot approve your proposal for mass migration from East Bengal. On the other hand, I shall advise you to return to your villages."

They replied, "We know that there are some good Muslims but unfortunately they could not give us protection. Moreover some Muslims, who had offered protection, afterwards joined the goondas in their murderous assault. We can never go back to our villages so long as the police officers, who passively let the murderers have their way, remain in their posts."

Gandhiji said, "I shall not ask you to return until the Muslims come forward and take up responsibility for your safety."

Next day Mahatmaji met a large number of persons and had detailed discussions with them. Nearly ten thousand men and women joined the evening prayer meeting.

In his after-prayer speech Mahatmaji said that he wanted to know whether Muslims were really repentent for what had happened. He would like to have a clear answer from them. He would not go back and would continue to work for Hindu Muslim unity even if the last Hindu left the locality.



At a mass gathering at Dewanjee Bari compound.

Plate 11

Travelling by boat through a maze of numerous canals and rivers Mahatmaji arrived at Nokhola, a village under the jurisdiction of Ramgunge Police Station on 12 November. He inspected the ruins of Chaudhury Bari (house of Chaudhury family) an enormous house composed of thirtytwo separate apartments. It had been looted and burnt to ashes.

“Kala” a Tibetan spaniel was roaming about the place in mournful silence. Its master and seven other members of his family had been butchered during the riots. Since then “Kala’s” whines haunted the place.

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"Kala" shows the way.

Plate 12

Eleven families consisting of eighty men, women and children lived at this Chaudhury Bari. Getting scent of imminent riots some male members of the family escorted a number of their womenfolk to a safer place. Shortly after their departure the house became a scene of murder and loot.

Mahatmaji was conducted to a room with corrugated iron roofs. The floor was still blood-stained. Torn books and papers lay scattered about on the ground.

These were the only memories of the young boy and his old grandmother who lived in this room and were butchered there.



Coming out of the tin shade.

Plate 13

When Mahatmaji came out of this room "Kala" led him forward with a soft whimper. Gandhiji followed the dog and came upon three human skeletons, one after another. Several skulls and bones lay pell-mell on the floor. Mahatmaji was shown the places where bodies to the victims of riot were thrown into fire or into ditches.



*Watching the skull and bones with Dr. Sushila Nair and Pyavelal on le'l and
Sm. Awa Gandhi*

Plate 14

Gandhiji then moved by boat to the next village, Sonachaka, and visited "Thakur Bari," a house containing more than a hundred rooms. It had been looted and then burnt to ashes. Mahatmaji with his companions stood in silence for a few minutes before an idol which had been disfigured and then thrown out of the newly erected temple by the Muslim hordes.



Before the broken image.

Plate 15

“Pakistan”, “We are believers in Koran”, “Allah Ho Akbar” were typical slogans displayed on the posters outside “Thakur Bari”. Twentyfour families with more than hundred and fifty members lived here.

They were all forcibly converted to Islam and kept in captivity for several days after the incident. The blockade slackened with the arrival of the leaders in the locality and the family escaped at the first opportunity.

Gandhiji was shown round several other temples defiled by Muslims.

Gandhiji returned to Dattapara after a five-hour tour. He visited the relief centre at Khilpara on his way back. Numerous rayaged and burnt down villages could be seen from the boat.





Inspecting a desfiled temple. Mrs. Kripalani and Pyarelal standing on extreme left.

Plate 16

Gandhiji arrived at Gomatali on 12 November and visited "Saha Bari". This big house with fortyfour apartments stood completely gutted.

Several thousand Muslims had attacked the house on 12 October. The inmates fled to a nearby jungle and were rescued by armed police after four days. Muslims again attacked and killed eleven of them when they were being escorted to safety by the armed guards.





Inspecting the ruins of Sahabari at Gomatali.

Plate 17

After visiting "Saha Bari" in scorching heat of the sun Gandhiji rested for a while in a cocoanut grove. Weeping villagers narrated to Gandhiji their tale of suffering. All of them had been forcibly converted to Islam. Vermilion and conch shell bangles, the most cherished symbols of married Hindu women, had been forcibly removed.

Sreemati Sucheta Kripalani distributed vermilion, bangles and Vaishnavic "Kanthis" among them.

The villagers said that they would be subjected to inhuman torture if they carried these Hindu insignias. Mahatmaji promised to arrange for their safety immediately on his return to Dattapara.



Choked with tears village women narrate their tale of woe.

Plate 17

Reshona.

Plate 18

Mahatmaji next visited the weavers' quarters in the village. They also had been forcibly converted to Islam.

Accompanied by Dr. Sushila Nair and Shrimati Ava Gandhi Mahatmaji went into their houses and heard the story of their sufferings.

A local Muslim leader spoke at the prayer meeting at Dattapara in the evening. He said, "Muslims wanted their Hindu brothers to come back and live in their own villages. They had promised that riots would not occur again. But the Muslims failed to understand why the Hindus are not willing to return inspite of this promise."

Mahatmaji said, "It was quite easy to ask others to return, but to return was not so easy. They had been robbed of all their belongings and had no place to live in. Where would they live on their return?"

Every one said that both the communities should again live together. But that did not mean that all should adopt the same religion. He had seen some of the burnt houses and frightened faces. These people had been forcibly converted and their near and dear ones had been murdered. They apprehended that such things might happen again.





An old weaver woman tells the story of her misfortune.

Plate 19

Gandhiji visited Nandigram, a village five miles from Dattapara, on 23 November. Men and women who still remained in the village welcomed Mahatmaji with folded hands and tearful eyes.

They said, On 12 October Muslims of Nandigram and Sripur extracted ten thousand rupees from the Hindu villagers. Then about eight to ten thousand Muslims from different localities looted the village and tortured the villagers. Even women and children were seen among the raiders.

The famous Katyayani temple was defiled and burnt down. Accompanied only by his women followers Gandhiji entered this temple and interviewed the village women there. He heard from them a sad story of humiliation and torture. Then he inspected the gutted ruins of the high school.



At the temple of goddess Katyayani.

Gandhiji returned to Dattapara in the evening. Two Hindus were murdered last Sunday on their way back from the prayer meeting. The murderers had not been apprehended.

This incident created panic and apprehension in the locality. People had expected that Government would restore law and order and arrange for rehabilitation. But the danger and anarchy still prevailed.

Gandhiji used to tell the villagers every day :—

If even one good Muslim and one good Hindu accept the responsibility for your security, then you should go back to your villages. But anarchy prevails inspite of the assurances of leading Muslims.

Riot-stricken people had so long endured in their endeavour to stay back. But they had now started migrating. During the last three days one third of the refugees at Dattapara relief camp had left the locality.

Now Gandhiji said, ‘I shall not ask anyone to return unless I get guarantee for their safety. I request them to wait in the relief camps a fortnight more. I shall make the final decision within this period. I have written to the Prime Minister of Bengal in this connection.’”



On way back to Dattapara.

Plate 20

Keshava.

Mahatmaji's Headquarters were removed to Kajirkhil on 14 November. Immediately after his departure a Muslim attacked a Hindu woman with a sword at Dattapara relief camp. This incident caused widespread panic.

Mr. Abdul Gofran and Mr. Ahmed Hussain, two ministers of Bengal, together with a number of Muslim leaders, discussed problems of rehabilitation with Gandhiji at Kajir-khil. They said that apprehension of arrest deterred the Muslims from coming to Mahatmaji.

On 16 November Gandhiji visited Karpara where dwellings of thirty families had been reduced to ruins by the riotous Muslim mob. Rajendra Lal Roy and his family had been cruelly butchered at this place.

Addressing the prayer meeting Gandhiji said that wherever he went he found signs of loot and destruction. These scenes deeply grieved him. He had come to Noakhali with the hope that Muslims would frankly speak out their minds and be repentant for what they had done. If their repentance was sincere Hindus would certainly be induced to return. Whatever might have been the root cause of the trouble Muslims could not deny that in this case they were the aggressors. Dwellings, schools and temples were destroyed by them. Nothing escaped their fury. Forcible conversions, abductions and other tortures had made the Hindus frightened and panicky. Men proved their own downfall when their behaviour instilled fear in others.



On way to prayer meeting.

Plate 22

Preliminary observations of the riot-torn area ended with the first part of Mahatmaji's tour at Kajirkhil. These scenes of inhuman destruction greatly affected him.

Gandhiji said, "Truth and nonviolence have sustained me through the last sixty years. But today I seem to miss that certainty of their power." He asked his followers to scatter out and work among the panic-stricken villagers under the direction of Shri Satish Chandra Das Gupta.

Gandhiji himself started on his lonely village to village pilgrimage to search for light in the engulfing darkness. Professor Nirmal Kumar Bose, Shri Parsuram and Shrimati Manu Gandhi accompanied him. On 20 November Gandhiji left Kajirkhil for Srirampur, a village four miles to the west.





Morning walk at Srerampur accompanied by Prof. Nirmal Bose.

Immediately after his arrival at Srirampur, Gandhiji established contact with local people. He asked for the help of a sincere Muslim who would be prepared to sacrifice even his life, if needed, for the cause of communal peace.

Mr. Samsuddin Ahmed, Minister of Bengal, and a number of officials called on Gandhiji to discuss Government's relief and rehabilitation schemes.

During his long stay of about a month and a half at Srirampur Gandhiji tried to establish intimate friendly relations with the poor Muslim masses. He made searching enquiries about their problems and difficulties and in deep sympathy suggested practicable methods of solution. In this way he gained an access to their humble and distressed hearts.

One day he visited the house of a Moulvi half a mile away from his camp. He enquired about the population and their education. In course of his discussions it was revealed that there was only one Matriculate among the fifteen hundred adult Muslims of the village. About a thousand persons could recite from memory some portions of Koran but nobody knew the meaning of what they recited.

On another occasion the Muslim villagers brought to him several children suffering without any treatment from Kalazar. During the riots the Muslims had burnt down all the dispensaries owned by Hindu doctors who had left the place in panic. Gandhiji at once arranged for their treatment and directed Dr. Sushila Nair and two others to take charge of the village.



Practising to cross bamboo bridge without any one's help.

Within a few days of his arrival at Srirampur, Gandhiji's frank sincerity began to convert the simple but prejudiced Muslim villagers into genuine friends. They began to realise that Gandhiji was a wellwisher and a friend of Muslims also and he had not come to help the Hindus alone. His courage and personality, on the other hand, instilled a calm fortitude in the hearts of the Hindus.

On 6 December several hundred people led by Shri Souren Bose came in procession from Chandipur singing Ramdhun. Later they came to Gandhiji's camp singing "Kiitan" to the accompaniment of drums and cymbals. This incident symbolized the new pulsation of life among the terror-stricken Hindus. It was a proof of the efficacy of Gandhiji's methods.

Gandhiji said that he had now become an inhabitant of Noakhali—he might even die there. Mahatmajī began to learn Bengali with great energy and enthusiasm.

On 27 December, Pandit Nehru, Shri Sankar Rao Deo and Acharya Kripalani visited Srirampur to discuss important political matters with Gandhiji. Shri Sarat Chandra Bose, Mr. Asaf Ali, Dr. Rammanohar Lohia and other leaders also met Gandhiji at Srirampur.



At 7-30 A.M. on 2 January Gandhiji left Srirampur for Chandipur. Eight armed constables accompanied him for his security in spite of his refusal to have any armed protection.

On his way Mahatmaji halted at Maulavi Fazle Huq's house, village Shibpur. A number of Muslims had gathered there to meet him.

During his village to village tour Gandhiji followed the schedule enumerated below:—
7-30 A.M. Start for next village after breakfast; 9-30 A.M. to 2 P.M. Bath, lunch and rest at the next village; 2 P.M. to 4 P.M.—Spinning, study and receiving visitors; 4-45 P.M. Inspection round the village; 5-15 P.M.—Prayer meeting.

Mahatmaji stayed at Chandipur for three days. On 3 January Gandhiji addressed a gathering of about 300 women at Chengir Gaon village. He asked them to follow the brave and noble traditions of Seeta and Draupadi.

Speaking at the prayer meetings at Kajirbazar and Harishchar, Gandhiji said, "I have come here neither to strengthen the Congress nor to wreck the Muslim League. The only aim of my pilgrimage is to get in touch with the problems and difficulties of the villagers. Time and again I am asked to go to Bihar. But you should know that I have influenced the Bihar Government from here and given them suitable directions. But it is impossible for me to leave Noakhali where my work is of a different nature. I notice that very few Muslims come to my prayer meetings. Muslim brothers are hesitating to accept me as a friend. If they do not come to me I shall have to go to them in order to serve them."



At the residence of Fazal Haq.

On 7 January Mahatmaji arrived at Masimpur. At the prayer meeting a man suddenly stood up from among the audience and asked the Muslims to leave the place and most of them went away. Gandhiji said, "This is not the time for Namaj. Why, then, are these people going away?" They told Gandhiji that they were going away as they objected to the singing of Ramdhun at the meeting.

Gandhiji replied that though this incident pained him it was all to the good. It had given him an insight to the minds of the Muslims. He now understood that the Muslims of this place could not tolerate practice of their own religion by the Hindus. It clearly proved that the attacks of last October resulted from this intolerance. He had been told that "Pakistan" meant a land where freedom of religion prevailed. Those who thought "Pakistan" to be an exclusively Muslim land were on the wrong path.

After visiting Fatehpur on 8 January, he arrived at Daspara on 9 January. Only four Hindu families lived in this village. The Muslims had left the village in panic before Gandhiji's arrival. Mahatmaji was told that presence of armed constables had frightened them and Muslims could not come to him freely so long as the police remained with him.

Gandhiji said, "Why should innocent people be afraid of police? But it is the duty of those who have done wrong to surrender to police." He also told them that he had refused police protection but the Government turned a deaf ear to his refusal. The Government would perhaps consent to withdraw armed police if the Muslims could convince them of Mahatmaji's safety in their midst.

Gandhiji arrived at Lamchar on 11 January after passing a day at Jagatpur. Lamchar was the only village in the area where forcible conversion and abduction and rape did not take place. The Hindu young men had offered organised resistance and 11 persons were killed in the fight; 49 houses were plundered and burnt by the Muslim mob.

On 13 January Gandhiji arrived at Sahapur after a day's stay at Karpara. An old lady came to Gandhiji at this place. Her husband was a school teacher and had taught both Golam Sarwar and his father. This Golam Sarwar was held responsible for having engineered the brutal attack on Hindus.

Even this aged teacher did not escape the fury of the marauders. He had been murdered and his son was missing though the family paid their last savings to the Muslim raiders. Gandhiji was greatly moved by this story, He said that want of education was at the root of the riots.

After this Gandhiji visited Bhatialpur on 14 January and arrived at Narayanpur on 15 January. Badshah Mian, a very hospitable Muslim, was his host at this place. He moved on from village to village till he arrived at Shirandi on 20 January. Miss Amtus Salam, a devoted Muslim follower of Gandhiji, was on fast at that time. On Mahatmaji's intervention Muslim leaders of 45 villages gave a written undertaking for the protection of rights of Hindus and thus persuaded Miss Amtus Salam to break her fast.



At Ramdevpur—going through the 'Harijan' and some other papers.

Plate 28

On 22 January Gandhiji arrived at Paniala. Shri Amritlal Chatterji, father of Shrimati Ava Gandhi, had established his headquarters at this place. Some Muslim leaders met him at this place.

On 23 January Gandhiji paid his homage to Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose at village Dalta, on the occasion of Netaji's birthday.

He arrived at Muraim on 24 January and accepted the hospitality of Habibullah Patwari. In this locality mass scale forcible conversions had taken place and Hindus had been forced to follow the Muslim rites and customs for more than three months. This had completely broken down their morale.

Gandhiji spent Independence Day (26 January) at a small village called Paniala. There was no ceremony at his camp as the Muslims were averse to the hoisting of tricolour flag.

Addressing a meeting Mahatmaji said that Subhas, pride of Bengal, did not fight for Bengal alone. He had fought for the liberation of the whole of India. Communalism or provincialism had no place in his army.

On 28 January he came to Panchgaon. Col. Niranjan Singh Gill of I.N.A. joined him there.



The Mahatma and his party moving to a new village.

*Plate 28
Neshan*

On 29 January Gandhiji arrived at Jayag, formerly a big and flourishing village—now badly damaged by riots.

A Muslim deputation waited on Gandhiji and told him that presence of outsiders was hampering early establishment of communal harmony. Though the Muslims had no objection to Gandhiji's presence in Noakhali yet he should go away and stay in Bihar for some time in order to win their confidence.

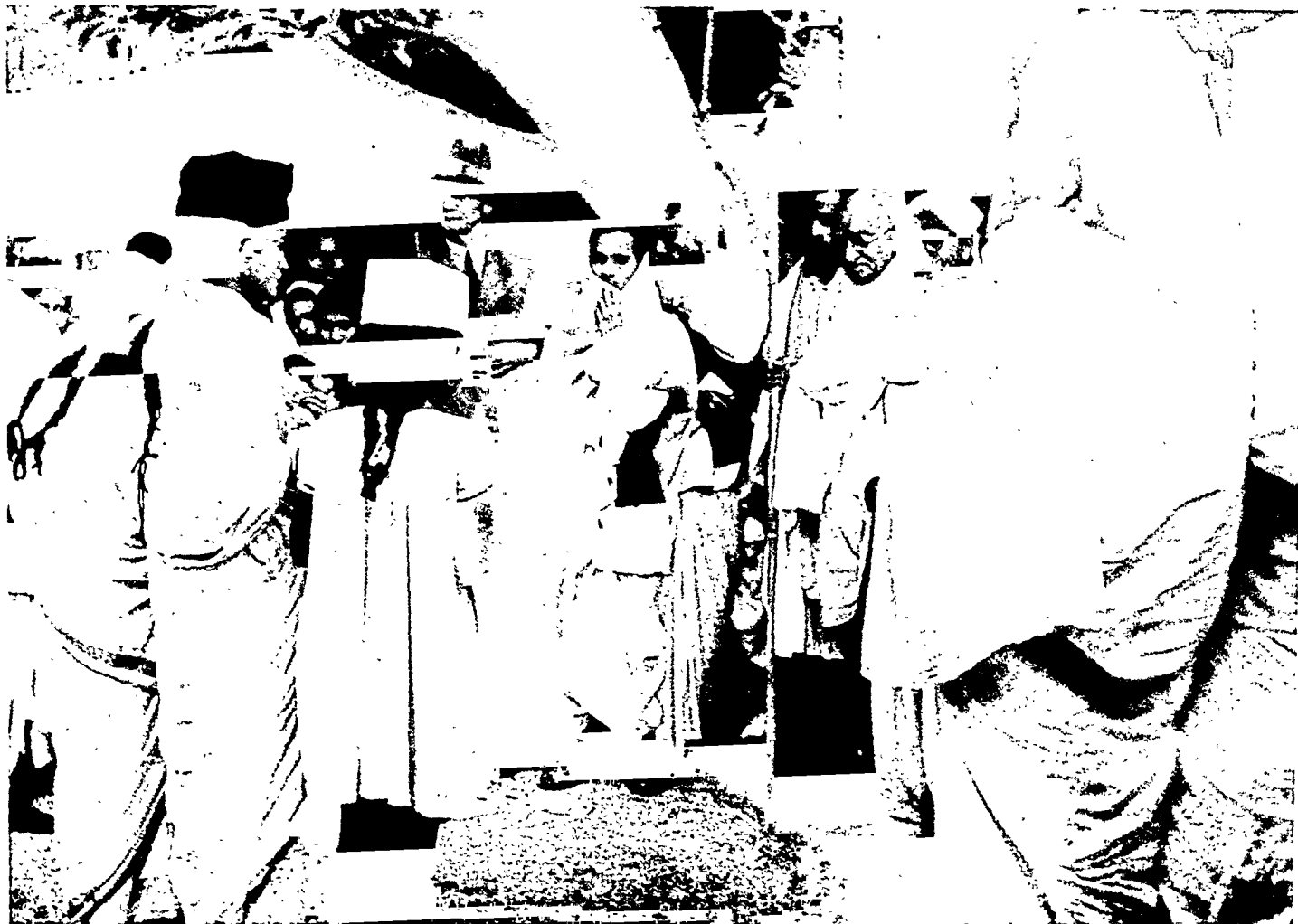
Relief workers informed him that the Muslims would not agree to the establishment of communal peace unless the Hindus withdrew all complaints even against guilty Muslims.

He was also told of the Muslim objection to recital of Koran by a non-Muslim (i.e. Gandhiji) and their disapproval of Mahatmaji's favourite hymn "Ram Rahim Krishna Karim". Gandhiji refuted their arguments and deplored this religious intolerance.

After visiting Amki, Anandipur, Junadpur, Nandiar Para and other villages, Mahatmaji arrived at Navagram. All the houses of this predominantly Hindu village had been damaged by looters and the inhabitants forcibly converted to Islam.

Gandhiji was asked at a women's meeting what should a woman do in case of an attack by ruffians. Should she resist or run away? He replied with conviction, "Even the way of violence is superior to cowardice."

Mr. Horace Alexander and eight British military officers came here to pay their respect to Gandhiji and wished him success in his peace mission.

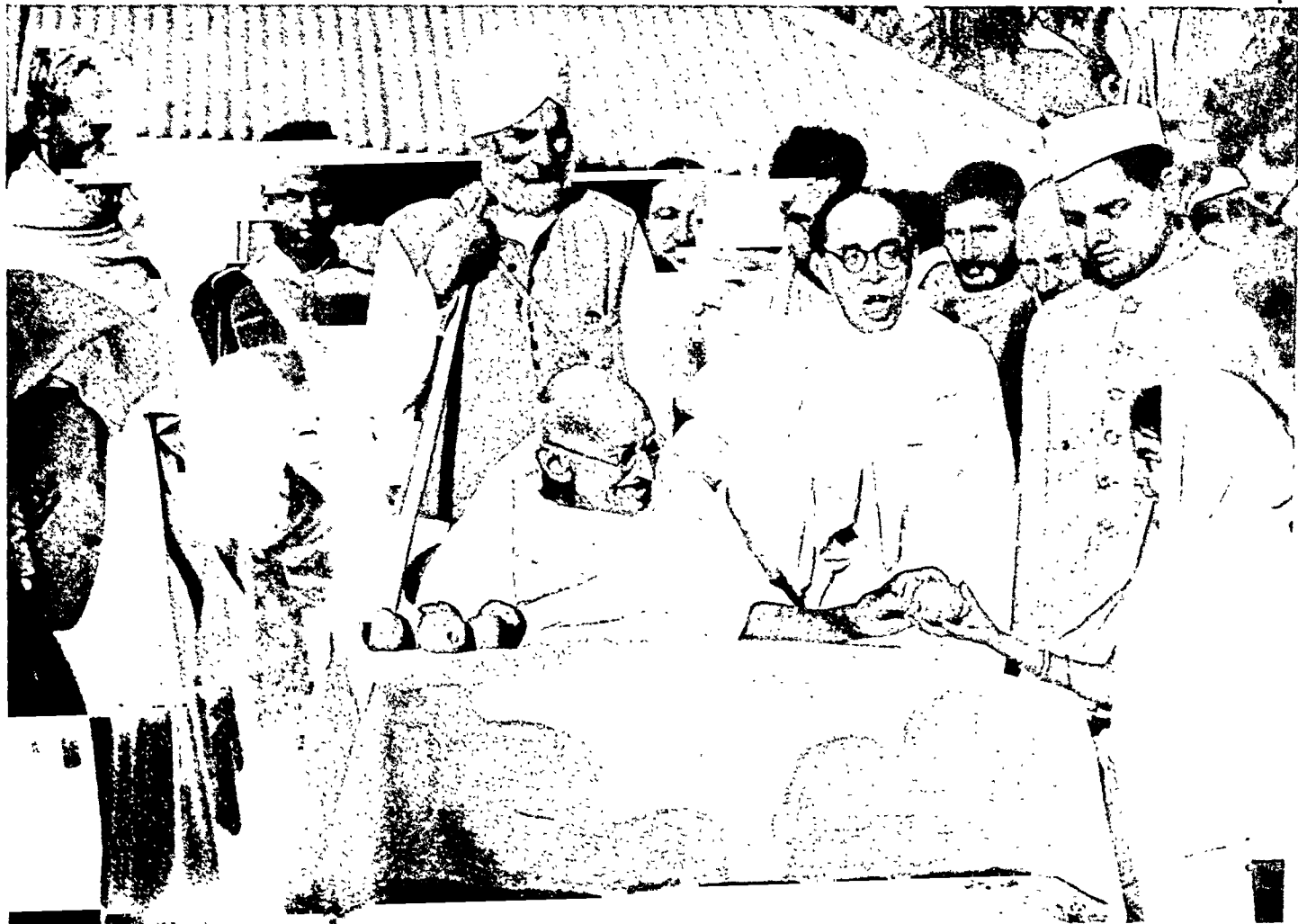


*Girls welcome Gandhijee with "Bande Mataram" Song at Nandiarpara.
Mr. Horace Alexander is also seen standing.*

Gandhiji came to Amishapara on 1 February. A deputation led by Moulvi Latifur Rahaman informed him that poor Muslims of the locality who had participated in the loot were repentant. They now wanted to return the looted articles. Fiftyseven cows had been slaughtered or forcibly lifted from ten adjacent villages. Persons responsible for that decided to pay fifty rupees per cattle as compensation. Gandhiji's eyes beamed with satisfaction at the news of this change of heart.

On 3 February Gandhiji held his prayer meeting in the compound of the Madrassah at Sadhur Khil, after ascertaining that local Muslims had no objection to the singing of "Ramdhun". At a public reception local Muslims acclaimed him as the "greatest man" and requested him not to oppose Pakistan. They also urged him to go to Bihar. Next day the prayer meeting was held at the house of Salimullah Sahib at his own request.

Gandhiji arrived at Prasadpur on 7 February after spending a day at Srinagar and another at Dharmapur. Major General Shah Nawaz joined him there.



*Distributing among children fruits presented to him at a Muslim house
on his way to Amishapara from Navagram. Sardar Jeeban Singh
stands behind the Mahatma.*

Plate 31

Muslim volunteers came to help Gandhiji when he arrived at Nandigram from Prasadpur on 8 February accompanied by Major General Shah Nawaz, Shri Haridas Mitra and Shrimati Bela Mitra.

In his post-prayer speech Mahatmaji deplored the attempts at economic boycott of Hindus. In reply to a question he said, "There are many good Muslims in Noakhali, for otherwise this place would have been like hell itself. During my stay of three months I have found that confidence is gradually returning among Hindus and there has been a change of heart among many Muslims."

Shri Surendra Mohan Ghosh, President, B.P.C.C. and Shrimati Labanya Prova Datta conferred with Gandhiji at Nandigram.

Vijaynagar, 9 February. Women relief workers told Gandhiji that they had contacted Muslim women in their own houses. But it seemed that mutual distrust was deeply embedded and so establishment of communal harmony was very difficult.





*Gandhiji crossing a very dangerous bridge on his way to Nandigram
from Pasadpur. Sm. Bela Mitra precedes him.*

At Vijaynagar prayer meeting Gandhiji dealt with many questions raised by relief workers and local people. A Muslim said, "You have declared that you will not leave Noakhali until Hindu Muslim unity is achieved. You have also expressed your desire to lay down your life for that cause if needed. Are you not unjustly attracting attention of the whole world to Noakhali by such utterances ? Is there really any trouble here still now ?"

Mahatmaji replied, "I am here as your friend and servant. I shall leave Noakhali as soon as Hindus and Muslims come to live as brothers. But I am sorry to say that the reports I am receiving do not at all signify communal amity."

Another Muslim said, "Hindus are not returning inspite of assurances for safety by Muslims. By this attitude they are trying to create the false impression that communal trouble is still continuing." Gandhiji replied, "Hindus will surely come back if the Muslims sincerely desire their return. But the situation is not so simple as you have tried to make it out."

Mahatmaji came to Kafilatali on 12 February after spending a day at Hamchandi where he held detailed discussions about rehabilitation problems. Unprecedented number of Muslims including children and a Muslim National Guard attended the prayer meeting at Kafilatali.





At the prayer meeting, Vijaynagar.

Gandhiji moved to West Keroa on 14 February. A Muslim came from Khulna to discuss problems of communal harmony with him. When Gandhiji invited him to lunch, the Moulvi refused to take any food cooked by a Hindu. Mahatmaji said, "Even the Muslim community is not free from the sin of untouchability."

Raipura, 15 February. Three persons had been murdered and 154 houses burnt down in this village. All other Hindus had been forcibly converted to Islam. Local Congress office had been turned into "Pakistan Club".

Organised attempts were made to excite the Muslims against Gandhiji and a Hartal was called to translate it into action. But in spite of this, immediately after Mahatmaji's arrival, the simple Muslim villagers came forward to help and cooperate with him. They informed him that most of the Muslims were prevented from coming to him by the threats a number of rich and powerful of Muslims. He also noticed many posters with hostile slogans painted on them.

Mahatmaji remarked at this that the news of boycott was most unfounded. But if the majority of Muslims did not support that policy then no harm could result. Probably Government would also take action against that policy. But, if unfortunately, the Government also decided to encourage boycott of Hindus, then Gandhiji would be forced to advise them to leave Noakhali. But he would ask them to claim compensation and not to bulge an inch, even at the risk of life, without it. Neither Hinduism nor Islam could encourage such action, which would force the minority to leave their ancestral homes. It was the result of sheer intolerance.

10



*Barefooted, Mahatmajī walking to Paschim Keroa from Purva Keroa
to the accompaniment of Ramdhun.*



Mahatmaji arrived at Devipur on 17 February and next day he moved on to Alunia in Tipperah district, another riot-affected area. He spent a day at the house of Nalini Chandra Das, a fisherman of Birampur. On his way to Bishkatali from there on 20 February Gandhiji found numerous hostile posters hanging from the wayside trees.

Some of the typical posters read like this:—

(a) Remember Bihar,

Leave Tipperah Immediately.

Repeatedly You Have Been Warned

Yet You Insist on Roaming
from House to House.

You Must Leave For Your Good.

(b) Go Where You Are Needed.

Your Hypocrisy Will Not Be Tolerated.

Accept Pakistan.

(e) Muslim League Zindabad,

Quade Azam Zindabad,

Long Live Pakistan, Down With Congress.

Gandhiji silently smiled at these.

On 21st February Gandhiji arrived at Kamlapur where Sm. Renuka Roy and her colleagues welcomed him.

After a day at Kamlapur he arrived at Krishnapur on 22 February. This area was inhabited by Nama-sudras (Harijan caste). In his post-prayer speech Gandhiji remarked that Hinduism would die if untouchability was not destroyed.

Mahatmaji passed through Char-Soladi on 23 February and on 24 February arrived at Haimchar, the last village on his tour programme. As Haimchar was mainly inhabited by Harijans, Thakkar Bapa (Shree A.V. Thakkar) selected this place for his work and had been living there. After a stay of six days among the Harijans of that place he left for Patna on 2 March at the request of Dr. Syed Mahmud, Relief Minister of Bihar.

After walking barefooted through the villages for about two months, sandals were again seen on Gandhiji's feet. At the time of departure he said, "Though I am leaving East Bengal for the present, my heart and thoughts will ever remain with you. I shall return as soon as possible." That desire of the Mahatma was never fulfilled!





